
2020/2021

Annual Report

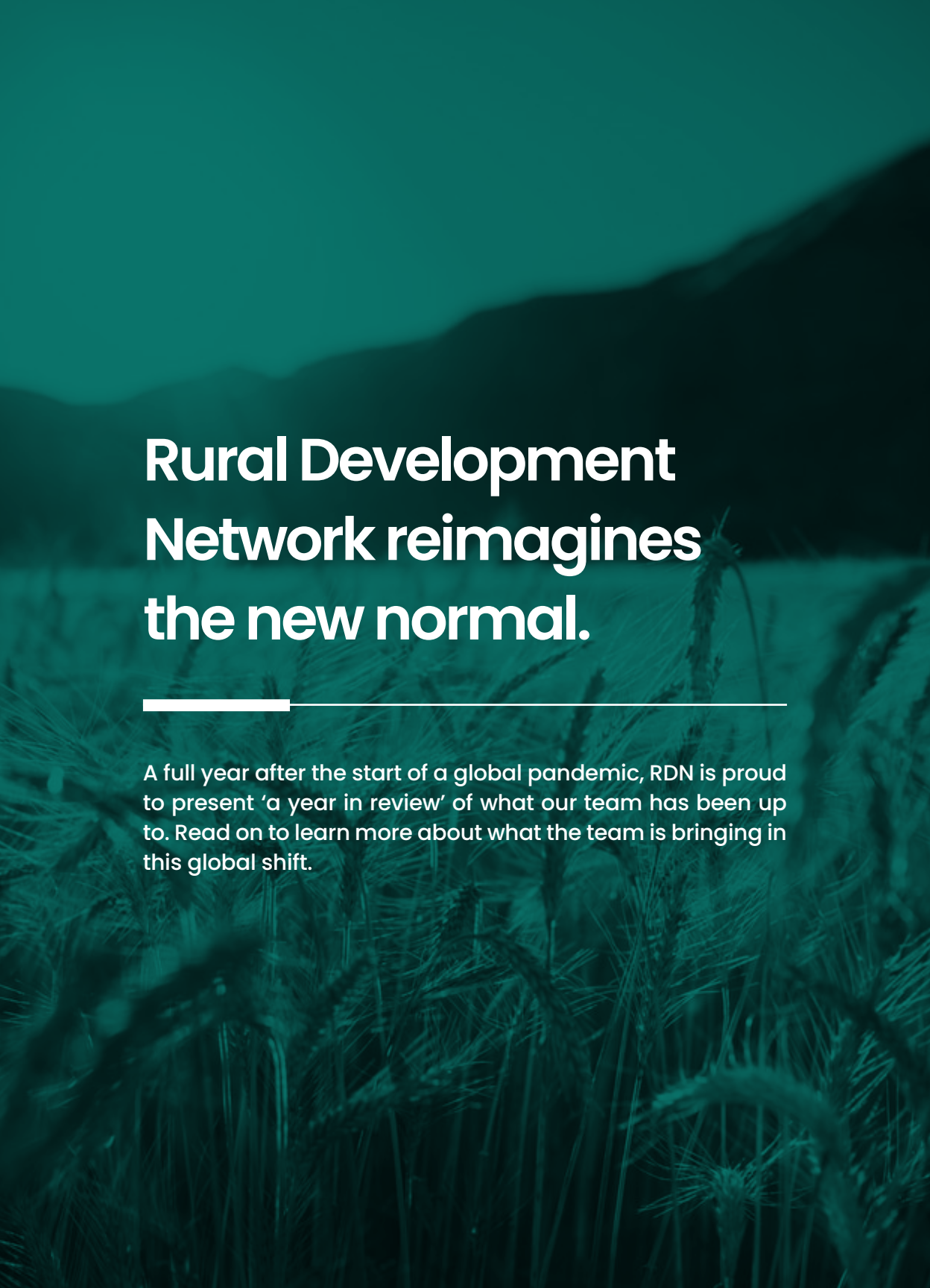
Rural Development Network

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Rural Development Network reimagines the new normal.

A full year after the start of a global pandemic, RDN is proud to present 'a year in review' of what our team has been up to. Read on to learn more about what the team is bringing in this global shift.

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A Message from the Board Chair



KEVIN SHUFFLEBOTHAM
President, Medicine Hat College

“Many workplaces were forced to make the virtual shift over the past year, and I applaud the entire team at the RDN for adapting so seamlessly.”

Many workplaces were forced to make the virtual shift over the past year, and I applaud the entire team at the Rural Development Network for adapting so seamlessly. As organizations adjusted to make things work over long distances, it was incredible to see how RDN not only survived but thrived during the global pandemic. Staff immediately adjusted to the norms of working from home and leveraged technology in an expert way, propelling the organization as a whole.

The need to support frontliners and the social communities around us has increased over the course of the pandemic. Sustainable housing, rural homelessness, health and wellness, immigration, agriculture — RDN's initiatives are busier than ever, stepping up to fill capacity gaps in rural communities.

Again, RDN staff had no problems adapting to the new normal and found new ways to leverage their

networks, technology, and resources to grow despite the circumstances. We've recently launched a well-received seniors' program to create age-friendly communities. RDN's rural immigration and transportation initiatives have grown from staff's passion projects into full-fledged programs, building multi-organizational partnerships throughout the region. Directionally, we are on the right path!

In regards to RDN's national pivot, the Board of Directors is extremely proud of the team. The new branding has allowed us to become a national body, which removes many limitations for rural communities outside of Alberta to access RDN's resources. We are excited to continue to connect and grow with other like-minded organizations to identify and fill capacity gaps in rural communities. As part of the rebranding, the Board of Directors has expanded to include an advisory committee with members from all across

our beautiful country, bringing a wide array of expertise from their communities. This has also allowed RDN to expand staffing capacities, hiring new team members from east to west.

Rebranding and expanding into a national organization during a global pandemic demonstrates the strength and the undeniable resilience of the RDN team. Working tirelessly with Alberta's rural communities to support rural sustainability, they have seen that the needs aren't confined to any one province. This rebrand will allow RDN to better serve rural communities — no matter where they are — by providing resources, offering services, and acting as a conduit to create meaningful connections.

We have already seen some incredible results from these changes and will continue to see very positive outcomes over the next 5-10 years. It has truly been a pleasure to work alongside Board members

who show as much dedication and commitment to rural sustainability as that of the RDN team.

I believe that RDN's Executive Director, Dee Ann Benard, has set the team up for success through her dedicated leadership. As with any organization, we will continue to not only monitor our success but ensure its sustainability, and we have faith in Dee Ann's leadership to make that happen. I applaud the Board of Directors and the Advisory Committee for their commitment to RDN's success. We are so grateful to be working together during this monumental pivot in RDN's history and look forward to the future.

A Message from the Executive Director



DEE ANN BENARD
Executive Director

“Where things aren’t happening or there are gaps identified or there is no clear leader... We’re more likely to step in and try to pick up that mantle.”

This past year, we were able to continue much of our work online and adapt other work so it could be done remotely. Our annual symposium and cannabis youth education program were modified to be conducted virtually and, with the help of local service organizations, we were able to gather data to estimate rural homelessness and client needs in Alberta. Our Reaching Home initiative received federal COVID-19 funding, we expanded our Rural Immigration initiative, and we started new projects in three provinces and two territories. It was a sweet surprise that a year that started with so much uncertainty became a year of growth and new opportunities, and a testament to the commitment of the RDN team.

After 12 years, we're still identifying gaps in services where we can play a leading role in improving the quality of life in small communities. We launched new seniors' programs to combat ageism

and isolation, and worked with Olds to make it an age-friendly community. We also renewed our efforts to improve rural transportation, and have already gathered information from a variety of sources to inform our next steps.

The silver lining of adapting to lockdowns was that people realized that virtual communication saves a lot of travel time and money and provides more opportunities, especially for very remote and isolated areas like Canada's North. Our proposed rural broadband initiative is timely, given the greater need for and acceptance of virtual communication.

Through word of mouth, we grew into a national organization because there are few organizations outside of Alberta that provide rural communities with similar services to the ones we offer. More growth is anticipated in the next five years as we actively work to raise our

national profile and increase staffing in every province and territory. Alongside our lofty ambitions, we recognize the great work other organizations across Canada are doing, and want to work with them. To that end, we created the Canadian Rural Collaborative (CRC), a group of like-minded organizations from across Canada that meets regularly to share information and find synergies and ways to work together.

Also in the spirit of collaboration, we continue to organize provincial and national coalitions of organizations through the Alberta Rural Coalition on Housing and Homelessness (ARCH2) and the Canadian Association on Rural and Remote Housing and Homelessness (CARRHH), where members can collaborate on projects and share ideas and resources. We're hopeful that our collective voice can be more effective in advocating to decision-makers about

challenges that are common to all rural communities. To support our evidence-based advocacy and awareness-raising efforts, we are committed to doing more data collection, like this year's Rural Homelessness Estimation Project.

As always, my hardworking, resourceful, and dedicated team gives me hope, energy, and excitement every day. This past year, they expanded existing initiatives, started new ones, and worked around and through our new and uncertain COVID times, all without missing a beat.

In keeping with our new national focus, our board now has advisory members from outside of Alberta who have relevant expertise in our initiatives. I am grateful to the board for trusting me to take risks. Their guidance and support has been essential to the growth and development of RDN, and we're in a strong position to implement our future plans.

Expanding outside of Alberta's borders – the RDN pivot.

The more we worked on supporting rural sustainability in Alberta from a variety of approaches, we saw that similar needs exist across rural Canada. To better reflect our evolution and make our resources more accessible to all rural communities, we transitioned into the RDN.

ARDN originated in Alberta as a partnership of Alberta's 21 public post-secondary institutions. With the support of these institutions and the dedication of rural communities in Alberta, ARDN has evolved and grown since 2009, developing and delivering a wide range of projects, resources, and capacity building services.

The more we worked on supporting rural sustainability in Alberta, the more we saw that similar needs exist across all of rural Canada. For the past several years we have been engaging with rural communities and groups in other provinces as well, providing resources, offering services and capacity building, and connecting people through a national network and events. We have expanded the geographic area that we serve as well as the types of organizations we work with, and we see immense potential to continue driving change across rural Canada with the work we already do.

To better reflect our evolution and make our resources more accessible to all rural communities, we refreshed our name and visual identity. The Alberta Rural Development Network is now known as the Rural Development Network.

This does not mean we are shifting from our Alberta roots. Rather, we're expanding to better assist changemakers across rural Canada by leveraging the connections and resources we've amassed over the years. We will continue to build upon and support the amazing work being done by other organizations across Canada, with the aim of filling gaps and not duplicating services.

Our rebranding journey reflects the values we embody as we evolve to better serve the people we work with going forward. To those who took the time to provide feedback during this process, we sincerely thank you; this rebrand couldn't have happened without you

The Story Behind Our Logo

There is no cookie-cutter definition of “rural” that can adequately represent the diversity of rural communities from coast to coast to coast, and we wanted to capture that diversity in our new logo. We also wanted to incorporate elements of our existing visual identity from our Sustainable Housing Initiative and the Agriculture and Food Council (which amalgamated with the ARDN this past year) and tie these identities together under the new brand.

What emerged from this was a blooming illustration that represents the endless potential for growth in rural communities and the various initiatives we work on. Taking elements from a leaf’s natural structure, the concept started with diamond shapes stemming from a single point. This concept was refined and complemented by colours from Canadian landscapes to represent the beauty and

diversity of rural Canada: bright yellow canola fields, fresh greenery, and blue skies.

We are extremely proud of Elnaz Aliasl, a member of our team, who led the development of our logo and translated our vision into an image that will define our organization for years to come.

Our refreshed name and brand was announced in November 2020, and the legal name change to the “Rural Development Network Society” took effect in January 2021.



Rural Development Network

RDN'S WORK RECEIVES **RECOGNITION**

RDN is proud of the following accomplishments that help elevate our work, resources, and services on a national scale. These awards recognize the value of making resources comprehensive and completely accessible to anyone in Canada.

CMHC's Gold Roof Awards

In November 2020, the RDN received two awards from the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC). **The Gold Roof Award for Housing Research Excellence** was awarded for the Step-by-Step Guide to Developing Affordable Housing. This award is given to significant research contributions that has increased knowledge or understanding in one of the National Housing Strategy's priority areas.

The Step-by-Step Guide to Developing Affordable Housing

shows how to create and plan affordable housing. It takes users from the start to the end of affordable housing development in a series of clear steps. Even small or inexperienced groups can use the bilingual guide to understand industry jargon and develop their own projects.

In the same ceremony, the RDN received the **Gold Roof Award for Knowledge to Action** for the Step-by-Step Guide to Estimating Rural Homelessness. This Knowledge to Action Award recognizes initiatives that close the gap between what is known from

excellent research and what is done with that knowledge in the housing sector.

The Step-by-Step Guide to Estimating Rural Homelessness helps rural and remote communities collect data on homelessness. Data collected helps communities identify service need and acquire funding, and it can be shared through the Rural Homelessness Database

It can be challenging to collect tangible data on rural homelessness in Canada. Traditional point-in-time counting methods that are used in urban locations don't work in rural ones. This means that rural homelessness has largely been a hidden problem.

The free guide was created with input from experts from across the country. Their knowledge helps reduce the mystery around affordable housing for organizations that are planning their own projects. This ensures they are capable of creating sustainable housing for those in greatest need.

Both of these awards came with \$10,000 each for RDN to continue to raise awareness and extend the reach and impact of these guides

CHRA's Community Builder Award

In September 2020, the RDN was awarded the Canadian Housing and Renewal Association's Community Builder Award, which recognizes an individual, business or organization that has had a major impact at the community level in promoting affordable housing and/or preventing and ending homelessness.

LEARN ABOUT

OUR INITIATIVES

A full year after the start of a global pandemic, the RDN is proud to present 'a year in review' of what our team has been up to.



HOUSING



HEALTH &
WELLNESS



NETWORKS



HOMELESSNESS



SYMPOSIUM



TRANSPORTATION



AGRI-FOOD



IMMIGRATION

SUSTAINABLE HOUSING INITIATIVE

“The pandemic created an environment of uncertainty and added barriers which increased the need for housing. As we strive to address this need, the pandemic provided us an opportunity to step back and rethink the ways we approached housing and how to better support communities in the long-run.”

THE TEAM



**ZAIN
ABEDIN**

Director,
Community
Engagement



**ASAD
BHATTI**

Manager,
Capital Funding



**AZAM
KHATTAK**

Analyst,
Research &
Programs



**DANIEL
MORIN**

Analyst,
Research &
Programs



**SHADI
MERHEJ**

Senior Analyst, Policy
and Research

Housing

What a year it has been! We entered this fiscal year with a global pandemic affecting every individual across the globe, including us, our loved ones, the communities we work with, and the people we serve. The pandemic created an environment of uncertainty and added barriers which increased the need for housing. As we strive to address this need, the pandemic provided us an opportunity to step back and rethink the ways we approached housing and how to better support communities in the long-run.

We quickly realized that every community in Alberta will redirect resources towards addressing the pandemic, so concerted efforts to address housing will temporarily remain on hold. Recognizing this, we decided to shift our focus towards research over implementation in order to renew our processes and prepare ourselves to support the surge in demand for

affordable housing as the pandemic dissipates. We also saw a similar shift from the communities that were engaging us for work; we saw more and more projects to address immediate needs arising from the pandemic and to create strategies and plans for future policy.

Noting our recent expansion across Canada and welcoming those who are new to RDN's work, the Sustainable Housing Initiative (SHI) is the housing arm within the RDN. The SHI supports rural, Indigenous, and northern communities and organizations across Canada complete the pre-development work required to access funding to build affordable housing.

As an organization, we strive to redefine how affordable housing is viewed and built. We created the *Step-By-Step Guide to Developing Affordable Housing* to help groups navigate the affordable housing development process. Developing affordable housing

SHI Project Locations



is not an easy task and requires capacity, expertise, and commitment. So for groups who may not have the capacity to take on a project, the guide acts as an inside-look as to what goes into developing affordable housing. The SHI is made-up of a team of experts with backgrounds in strategy, finance, data, and urban planning that work with the communities on a one-on-one basis and provide the capacity to help develop affordable housing on a cost-recovery

basis. This has proven to be a successful model that has helped us provide support to organizations across Canada.

This year, the SHI worked on 26 projects, some carried over from last year and some new. Twenty-one (21) of these projects were with organizations from Alberta, Ontario, and British Columbia.

Two of the projects involved delivering workshops on the *Step-By-Step Guide for Developing Affordable Housing*.

RDN was funded by the National Housing Strategy's Demonstrations Initiative to deliver workshops in Alberta, British Columbia, Ontario, Quebec, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Northern Communities, and the Atlantic regions. Initially, we were planning to deliver these workshops in person, but due to the pandemic, they were delivered virtually. The second project was funded by the City of St. John's and the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) to deliver workshops to groups in Newfoundland & Labrador that CMHC and the city were engaged with. These workshops were very successful, and we are now exploring the opportunity to continue this sharing of knowledge on a continuous basis. If your community would like to take part in one of our workshops, please get in touch.

One of the 26 projects was dedicated towards researching alternative ways to build and operate co-operative housing

in Alberta. Funded by the Alberta Real Estate Foundation (AREF), we partnered with the Alberta Community and Cooperative Association (ACCA) and the Northern Alberta Cooperative Housing Association (NACHA). Please refer to the next section to learn more, and feel free to get in touch with us to explore how this research can be applied to your co-op.

The last two projects were directly related to RDN and our dedication towards research during the pandemic. One of the projects we worked on was to plan and evaluate the development of our own affordable housing project which was funded by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities' (FCM) Green Municipal Fund (GMF). Successful development of this project would help us improve the support we provide to other groups across Canada. This project is currently on-going and is described in more detail below. The second project was to plan the second

version of our *Step-By-Step Guide to Developing Affordable Housing*.

Since the launch of the guide in 2019, users have identified a few gaps, so we used this time to formally identify them, create parameters for the second version of the guide, and create a new National Advisory Committee to support us in the development of the updated guide. All of these tasks were funded by the New Market Funds Society, who will actively support us in the development of the new version over the next couple of years. At the moment, we have applied for funding to develop this guide from various sources and are waiting to hear back.

Another notable mention would be the support we are providing to Map Your Property, a for-profit based out of Toronto. We were listed as a not-for-profit partner on their Housing Challenge application to CMHC. They have been selected as one of 25 groups to move to the next stage of the

challenge, and we are hoping to provide support in various capacities next year.

As the pandemic dissipates, we anticipate a greater demand for support across the country. In order to better understand future demand and allocate our resources, we launched Expressions of Interests (EOIs) in Newfoundland & Labrador and Quebec last year to determine local needs. We are looking to launch EOIs in more regions soon.

The future looks bright for SHI since our success is permanently eradicating the need for affordable housing and hence the need for SHI to exist.

FCM Affordable Housing Project

In 2020, SHI received funding from FCM's Green Municipal Fund (GMF) to explore the feasibility of our own affordable housing project in Edmonton, AB. We performed several pre-planning, exploratory tasks,

including:

- The creation of a land suitability map for the City of Edmonton
- Rescoping the project from a renovation project to a new-construction project in order to maximize its impact on the affordable housing supply in the city
- Financial modelling of various site options to better understand the project's financial requirements
- Conducting a city-wide community engagement through an online survey and three case-study focus groups in key neighbourhoods

Through this project, SHI will be better informed in developing its own affordable housing project in Edmonton. Next steps include seeking funding partners, performing additional analysis, and attaining land for the project.

Paths for Co-op Housing

Development Guide & Research Report

In 2020, RDN received funding from the Alberta Real Estate Foundation (AREF) to research co-op housing in Alberta and how co-ops can operate more efficiently and sustainably. Through this project, we performed various forms of research, including:

- A literature review of over 39 academic articles and 5 industry resources
- Stakeholder consultation through surveys, focus groups, and interviews
- Financial analysis using customized financial models

We identified various strategies that housing co-ops or housing co-op developers could utilize. The findings of this project can be accessed through:

- A Development Guidebook that summarizes the key findings in an easily-

- digestible way
- A Development Tool to allow users to plan strategy implementation and test financial feasibility
- A Research Report to

showcase our research findings

PSYCHOLOGY OF AESTHETICS

“The psychology of aesthetics examines how building design elements that have been well-tested in labs can be applied in the real world to positively influence residents’ mental well-being.”

THE TEAM



SCOTT TRAVIS

Director,
Research and
Programs



ELNAZ ALIASL

Policy
Researcher &
Project Manager

Psychology Of Aesthetics


Psychology of Aesthetics

reviews research about our environment and its real-world applications in an attempt to improve residents' mental health. Studies have shown that our living environment can have an impact on human physiology. Students have had higher test scores in rooms painted certain colours, and surgical patients have significantly shorter recovery times if they are in a room with a window. Since Canadians spend 80 to 90 percent of their time indoors, RDN (with support from the Alberta Real Estate Foundation) wanted to understand which features can help the mental well-being of those living in affordable housing.

We collected peer-reviewed, scientific literature to create an illustrated and accessible guide. *Psychology of Aesthetics* makes recommendations that balance cost effectiveness and the weight of evidence. Not

only will the recommendations increase the well-being of tenants, but they may also reduce operating costs of the building, and, in turn, help win community support.

Because this is the first project of its kind for affordable housing, we are seeking opportunities to implement the guide's recommendations in real-world spaces. RDN is currently pursuing partnerships with private and post-secondary partners to produce education outreach modules for stakeholders in the affordable housing space.



Design considerations for residents' mental wellness.

Psychology of Aesthetics: how cost-effective features and improvements can help the mental well-being of those living in affordable housing.

HOMELESSNESS

“This year in particular has been filled with new partnerships, opportunities, growth and uncertainty for projects, as issues facing rural communities related to housing and homelessness have been exacerbated by the global COVID-19 pandemic, yet our communities and community based organizations continue to work tirelessly to support their most vulnerable citizens.”

THE TEAM



**SYDNEY
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Program Manager,
Homelessness
Initiatives



**LINDA
BERNICKI**

Project Consultant



**MAUDE
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Coordinator,
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**SARAH
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Program Assistant,
Homelessness
Initiatives



**VANESSA
PISANELLO**

Program Assistant,
Homelessness
Initiatives

Homelessness

The end of 2019-2020 marks the conclusion of the second year of the Reaching Home program, the Government of Canada's homelessness strategy. RDN receives just under \$1M annually in Reaching Home base funding to support rural and remote communities in Alberta. This funding — which is administered to 13 recipients, including not-for-profits, municipalities, Family and Community Support Services (FCSS), and a Native Friendship Centre — assists shelter/mat program operations, homelessness prevention efforts, and housing and outreach supports (i.e. regional housing liaison staff and a youth outreach worker).

Our multi-year projects have adapted to continue serving individuals and families who are homeless or at risk of homelessness during an extremely challenging time of increased financial hardship. This past year alone, Reaching

Home base funding supported over 3,500 overnight stays in rural Alberta.

In April 2020, RDN received an initial \$796,692 in Reaching Home funding through the Government of Canada's COVID-19 Economic Response Plan. In September 2020, they announced an additional \$1.8M in Reaching Home COVID-19 funding to support rural and remote communities in Alberta — specifically frontline workers — to respond to heightened needs due to the pandemic. After receiving the funds later in the fall, the Reaching Home team launched a second Call for Proposals in December 2020 under guidance from our Regional Advisory Board. Over 50 communities applied for funding, including rural and Indigenous communities, resulting in over \$10M of project requests. Key funding priorities included continuing support of organization's COVID-related measures (PPE, cleaning, hotel stays), homelessness prevention, capital projects, and expenses

associated with increased operations since many shelters remained open 24/7 to provide ongoing support.

Overall, these two rounds of Reaching Home COVID-19 funding directly supported 51 projects and communities across the province that are not only providing support for short term needs but also aiming to address longer-term supportive housing needs. Of the 51 projects, 8 capital projects are underway (5 not-for-profits, 2 First Nations, 1 Métis Settlement) that will renovate existing facilities and

purchase new buildings to upgrade and create emergency shelters and transitional supportive housing units.

Looking ahead to next year, the federal government's fall 2020 economic statement announced an additional \$299.4 million would be provided through the Reaching Home program in 2021-2022. RDN was thrilled to learn this news and awaits more information on allocation amounts and how this funding may be utilized to combat rural and remote homelessness in Alberta.



RURAL HOUSING AND SERVICE NEEDS ESTIMATION PROJECT

“Over 30-day periods throughout Fall 2020, partner organizations surveyed clients about their housing conditions and the kinds of services they need and receive.”

THE TEAM



**JULIA
JUCÓ**

Project
Manager



**SCOTT
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Managing
Editor



**AZAM
KHATTAK**

Data
Specialist

Rural Homelessness Estimation Project

In April 2020, RDN released a Call for Expressions of Interest that invited any rural-based organization to apply for funding to conduct a month-long estimation count, beginning in fall 2020. Successful groups received a \$2,000 grant to help offset the costs of participation (e.g. staff time, printing costs, participant/partner honorariums, etc.). This project was made possible through Reaching Home.

Twenty-eight (28) communities were selected to participate in this year's Estimations Project. Communities identified project leads who were instrumental in the success of the project. They were responsible for inviting local partners to participate in training sessions, promoting the surveys over the 30-day period, and making the community aware of the survey.

Due to capacity limitations, 4 of the 28 communities

were unable to complete the project. This report outlines results from the remaining 24 communities. The number of participating agencies varied across communities and was dependent on local capacity and willingness to participate.

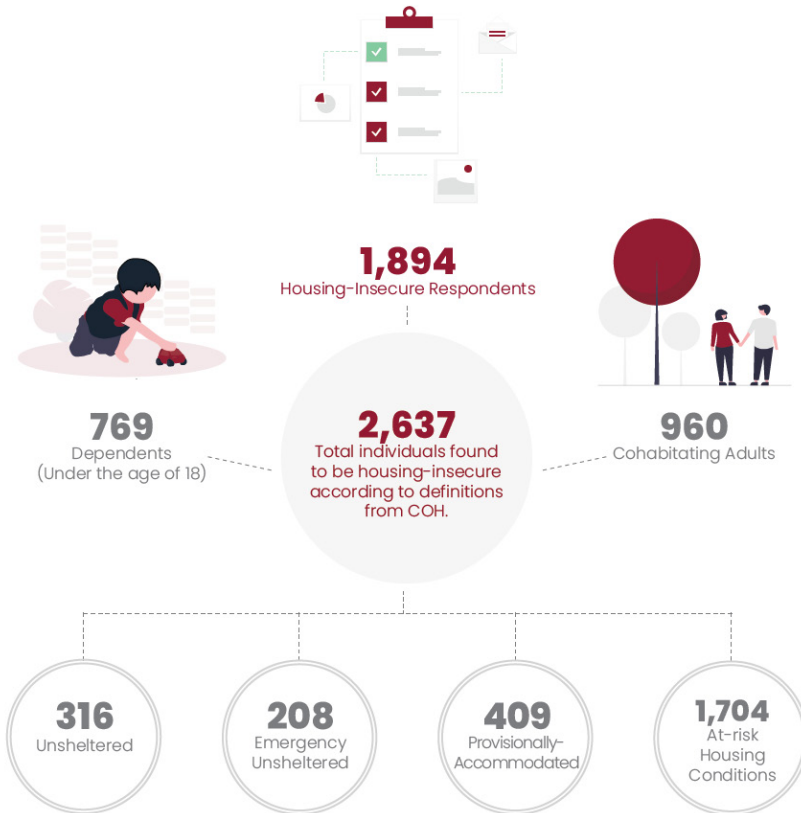
The participation of local service providers was an attempt to include individuals who may not be as visibly homeless as those who are completely unsheltered. According to the data collected for this survey, almost two-thirds of the homeless would not have been located and counted if a traditional Point-in-Time (PiT) count had been used.

Our project estimates that almost half of all people requesting social services in rural Alberta are experiencing housing insecurity (907 out of 1,894). When family and friends living with them are included, the number more than doubles to 2,143, including 276 who are children under 18.

A high percentage (71%) of respondents were unemployed, and four of the most common reasons given for housing instability were economic, even for respondents who were employed. Medical conditions that prevented respondents from working —like illness,

disability, or addictions — were four other common reasons for housing instability.

COVID-19 was another reason given, which suggests that vulnerable populations are being impacted in a significant way by the pandemic



IMMIGRATION & TRANSPORTATION

“Over the past year, the Rural Immigration initiative has expanded to reach more communities across the country while continuing to provide training and education for service providers to support newcomer clients.”

THE TEAM



**JAYDE
ROCHE**

Program
Manager



**ELNAZ
ALIASL**

Policy
Researcher &
Project Manager



**DANIEL
WARING**

Research
Assistant

Immigration

In 2020, we worked with a team of graduate students at the University of Alberta's School of Public Health to conduct a rural immigration needs assessment on four communities in Alberta: Strathmore, Brooks, Claresholm, and Hinton. This project aimed to provide a better understanding of the current gaps and/or barriers within their communities that affect how newcomer needs are met.

In December 2020, RDN and ActionDignity received funding from the Alberta Association of Immigrant-Serving Agencies (AAISA) to develop and deliver a self-paced and facilitated course for service providers on supporting multi-barriered clients. This course helped settlement workers learn best practices and understand the challenges that multi-barrier clients face so they could apply an intersectional lens to their work. The facilitated portion of the course was offered to one

cohort of students, and the self-paced version is available on demand through AAISA. Due to this partnership, there was an increased demand for the course, and three additional cohorts accessed the course.

RDN expanded our partnership with the Centre for Civic Religious Literacy (CCRL), a national non-profit interested in expanding religious literacy training to rural communities. We received funding in December 2020 from the Catherine Donnelly Foundation to improve the social and economic well-being of rural communities connected to the Islamic Families and Social Services Association (IFSSA) in Alberta and the Keepers of the Circle Indigenous Hub (KotC) in Ontario. This project seeks to foster an understanding of religious, spiritual, and nonreligious identities in rural areas. Project activities include interviewing local church leaders, politicians, Elders, and community members to understand local dynamics and

the delivery of religious literacy training.

In early 2021, we received funding for two projects. The first is a year-long project with the Hinton Employment and Learning Place (HELP) that is funded by the Government of Alberta's Multiculturalism, Indigenous and Inclusion Grant Program. This project seeks to conduct qualitative research on the barriers to social participation that newcomers in Hinton experience, and provide community partners with anti-discrimination training so that they can model best practices and promote inclusion. The second is a 1.5 year project in partnership with ASSIST Community Services, funded by the Government of Alberta. This project seeks to build the capacity of rural service providers to successfully attract, settle, and retain newcomers.

In March 2021, RDN received funding from Community Futures Meridian to complete a one-month project called

"Growing the KAC Community". We engaged members of the KAC (Kirriemuir, Altario, and Compeer) community to create a collective vision on future economic growth and prosperity of the region's communities, with a focus on succession planning and attracting and retaining business. The project involved conducting three community consultations, data collection, and a visual map of collected findings.

Over the past year, we presented at regional, national, and international conferences. Regionally, we presented our work with the Altario community at the Prairies and Northern Territories Small Centres conference. Nationally, we presented our anti-racism work at the 2020 Pathways to Prosperity conference. And internationally, we presented our work with the Centre for Civic Religious Literacy at two conferences: the 2020 Metropolis conference and the Forum on Workplace Inclusion.



RDN was represented by the Rural Immigration initiative as a member of the Settlement Sector and Technology Task Group that reported to IRCC's National Settlement and Integration Council (NSIC) and was managed by the Affiliation of Multicultural Societies and Service Agencies of BC (AMSSA). The group worked to

discover, examine, and learn about the settlement sector's needs in order to successfully implement hybrid service-delivery models. RDN was also invited to sit on the Partnership Council for the Prairie Skies Integration Network, a Local Immigration Partnership (LIP) operating in the Moose Jaw region of Saskatchewan.

Transportation

Bringing the rural stakeholders together to discuss transportation issues and concerns in the Battle River Region and Alberta.

Funded by the Alberta Real Estate Foundation, the Association for Life-Wide Living of Alberta (ALL of Alberta) reached out to RDN to run a year-long project that intends to find better solutions for rural transportation (RT).

Project aims and objectives are listed below:

- Gather and leverage significant RT research, actions, outcomes, and citizen-community collaboration in the Battle River Region (from Battle Lake on the west to the Alberta/Saskatchewan border on the east) and from the world beyond;
- Identify a range of ideas and solutions and assess their potential for use in rural Alberta.

- Connect the silos of people working independently on the RT issue by gathering together stakeholders from across Alberta to share information, ideas, success stories, and challenges;
- Include a variety of RT stakeholders: all levels of government; small community realtors; local advocacy organizations and businesses; rural-based, post-secondary institutions; and a wide variety of private transportation services, from East Central Express (a local taxi service) to Red Arrow;
- Report and disseminate findings;
- Host a virtual (or in-person) conference to discuss findings and next steps.

We have conducted a literature review on common issues and opportunities for rural transportation by examining successful programs in Alberta and Canada. A news release was sent to The Camrose Booster, Camrose Morning

News, The Community Press (Flagstaff and Area), the East Central Alberta Review, the Wainwright Star News, The Viking Weekly Review, and The Tofield Mercury. We also conducted one-on-one

interviews with stakeholders. So far, this has helped us to ascertain the communication potential within rural Alberta and the main challenges in each of these communities.



HEALTH & WELLNESS

“The shift from Substance Use Awareness to a more holistic initiative of Rural Health and Wellness has been organic. We look forward to growing this initiative with more communities”

THE TEAM



**CASSANDRA
RASKO**

Project
Manager

Substance Use Awareness (Rural Cannabis Outreach Program aka Clarity on Cannabis)

Reflecting on last year's annual report, we were quite hopeful to travel Alberta with the Clarity on Cannabis Exhibit. Well, as we all know, you can't predict how a pandemic will play out, and we have turned the physical exhibit into a virtual one!

For those who aren't familiar with the program, The Rural Cannabis Outreach Project, funded by Health Canada, was

created to educate rural youth about cannabis, including risks, effects, and different strategies to cope with stress and anxiety. Over the past year we had subject matter experts from the RCMP K-Division, Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction, and a youth psychologist review the materials.

The exhibit's content was already designed and vetted in the earlier phase of the project, but we still needed help to create the videos and transform the exhibit into a digital platform. We partnered with Pulp Studios for video

development and Amplmedia to construct the virtual interactive exhibit. The videos are complete, and the virtual exhibit is just a hair away from being ready to launch. In March of 2021, we held a virtual focus group with youth to review the functionality of the platform and received enthusiastic and positive feedback from those in attendance. Even with the disruption and uncertainty brought on by COVID-19, we managed to successfully pivot to an online platform. We cannot wait to launch the virtual exhibit to Alberta and beyond.

Another exciting opportunity for RDN was applying to the i4 Launchpad, a pitch competition during the fall of 2020 for creative minds, change-makers, and innovators in the health industry. We made it to the semi-finals where we provided a three-minute pitch to industry leaders. It was a great experience that allowed us to showcase our rural-focused cannabis exhibit.

New Horizons for Seniors

Recognizing Olds as an Age-Friendly Community

It has been a privilege to work with the Olds Age-Friendly Committee to move them closer to being a recognized age-friendly community. The project was launched right before the pandemic hit, and the Committee has worked tremendously hard to collect data and run focus groups during COVID-19 restrictions.

We've created a detailed report based on the data from the Committee that includes recommendations for Olds in the eight domains of age-friendly communities as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO):

- Outdoor Spaces and Buildings
- Transportation
- Housing
- Social Participation
- Respect and Social Inclusion
- Work and Civic Engagement

- Communication and Information
- Community and Health Services

The community engagement session had to be cancelled because of in-person gathering restrictions. With the support of the province's Community Development Unit, we planned a virtual engagement session that was held in April 2020. What we learned from that session helped guide a cost-benefit analysis and the resulting action plan for the community to use.

During that time, we also submitted a joint application to fund another New Horizons for Seniors anti-ageism project.

You Know Me: Ageism Awareness

Because there have been increased instances of ageism in many communities over the past year and raising awareness about ageism was one of the recommendations in our report, we applied for

funding to run an ageism awareness campaign where businesses can make a pledge to be anti-ageist. This project hasn't started just yet, but we received confirmation in March of 2021 that we were successful and look forward to our continued partnership with the Olds Age-Friendly Committee.

Keep in Touch- Partnership with Volunteer Lethbridge

Another new project is our partnership with Volunteer Lethbridge to help expand their Keep in Touch program to rural Alberta. Keep in Touch is a volunteer caller program connecting socially-isolated seniors with volunteers (who are also predominantly seniors) for weekly phone calls.

The Executive Director reached out to us in 2020, and after a few meetings we collaborated on an application to the COVID-19 Mental Health & Addictions third call for

proposals. This application includes developing an app to streamline the program, making it quicker for rural and remote champions to successfully set up the program in their community. We received notice in March 2021 that our application was successful.

So far we have facilitated an information session together, and rural communities in the ARCH2 network have expressed a lot of interest in adding Keep in Touch to their services. We look forward to developing the app and participating in the continued expansion of the program.



AGRI-FOOD

“We continue to learn more about the types of programs that exist, the needs of rural communities, and developing relationships and partnerships to support rural communities.”

THE TEAM



**SHELBY
ROWEIN**

Project
Manager

Agri-Food

Following the amalgamation between RDN and the Agriculture and Food Council in 2019, we have been exploring opportunities to support rural communities in the agri-food space. We continue to develop relationships and partnerships and learn more about the types of programs that exist and the needs of rural communities. Our goal is to identify specific areas and needs that are not being addressed by other programs and organizations.

RDN worked with a team of graduate students at the

University of Alberta's School of Public Health to develop a guiding framework for our future work within the agri-food and food security space. The students completed a literature review, environmental scan, SWOT analysis, and a social determinants of health analysis related to food security. They identified potential future areas of focus for RDN and potential program ideas like greenhouses, community resource maps, knowledge sharing, and food retail. This information and research will help us continue to identify areas of need in this space and inform our strategic planning.

Throughout this year, we have also explored new funding opportunities for agri-food projects. RDN applied for Nutrien's Community Investment Program and the Government of Alberta's Community Initiatives Program (CIP) to do a Community Food Mentors project inspired by the successful network of Community Food Mentors (CFM) on the Canadian East coast. We hope to adapt their program for Alberta, resulting in a province-wide network of individuals who share a passion for food, nutrition, and food security. These funding applications are still pending, and the review process has been delayed due to COVID-19.

RDN also applied to the Canadian Agricultural Partnership's Youth Agriculture Education Program for our FarmEd initiative. FarmEd is a place-based education initiative with multiple components: the development of a guide or "toolkit" on how to start and maintain a school farm, virtual training sessions for teachers,

and school farm pilot projects. Inspired by the successful school farm in the community of Altario, we conducted a survey to gauge the interest of schools and communities in having these resources, and all of the 41 respondents were interested. The target audiences for this initiative are students in Grades K-12, as well as teachers and surrounding community members. The intended outcomes for this project include enhanced teachers' and students' understanding of agricultural practices, improved food security levels through capacity building and food availability, and increased public trust in Alberta agriculture through experiential learning and partnership building with local farmers and food producers. Funding for this project was confirmed in March 2021, and the project will begin in April 2021.

NETWORKS AND COMMUNITY

Here we discuss the ways we facilitate dialogue, partnership, and resource-sharing among rural communities from coast to coast to coast.

CRRHH Symposium

The only national symposium of its kind dedicated to exploring how rural and remote communities tackle housing and homelessness issues.

The bi-annual Canadian Rural and Remote Housing and Homelessness Symposium (CRRHH) provides rural Canadian communities with actionable tools, best practices, and expertise needed to address the unique and complex issues surrounding homelessness and housing in rural and remote Canada.

In partnership with the Rural Ontario Institute (ROI), RDN had planned to host the second CRRHH Symposium

in Guelph ON, in May 2020. Due to COVID-19, it was rescheduled and will be hosted as a fully virtual event in June 2021. We are excited to take on the new challenge of planning a successful virtual event, and excited for the opportunities this new format will bring. With lower costs for attendees and eliminating transportation barriers, we hope the virtual format will allow even more people to join in the conversation from all corners of the country. We are also mindful of potential barriers due to lack of access to broadband, and will do our best to ensure the platform and presentations are as accessible as possible.



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ARCH2

The Alberta Rural Coalition on Housing and Homelessness (ARCH2) continues to be a place for members to share updates, connect, solve issues, and ultimately join in community. The network has grown this past year, and if you're looking to be part of a provincial working group that comes together to work through housing and homelessness issues that are unique to rural Alberta, we encourage you to reach out.

Why join ARCH2? It's a place for people to connect with others who care about affordable housing and ensuring every person has a home. Members come together to identify common issues in rural Alberta to inform advocacy, project priorities, and provide direction to RDN's housing/homelessness initiatives.

Many of the conversations this past year were focused on COVID-19, the funding available for communities, and

the recognition that affordable housing is vital in rural communities. We look forward to this next year and all the possibilities the ARCH2 network has to offer.

CARRHH

The Canadian Association on Rural and Remote Housing and Homelessness (CARRHH) was established after the inaugural CRRHH symposium as a way to continue the conversation about the unique challenges faced by rural and remote communities. The network is a platform for collaborative exchanges of information, resources, and ideas. CARRHH is quickly approaching its second year and one thing is certain: meeting with people from across rural Canada is invaluable.

Updates this past year have been predominantly focused on COVID-19, and there have been some positives amidst the chaos. For example, more communities are recognizing the inequities in society, and

there has been a push across some communities to direct resources and funding towards affordable housing.

While this is promising, we know that many communities need support and to band together as a group to

influence policy. Whether it's through an Election Tool Kit, or sharing reports/strategies, CARRHH is a place for people to work together to generate affordable housing solutions in rural and remote communities across Canada.



FINANCE & OPERATIONS

Our Operations and Finance team is a small but mighty one.

Since the pandemic began, RDN has implemented internal cost-saving measures and leveraged several funding opportunities for economic recovery, allowing us to keep all staff employed and mitigate financial risk.

The Operations and Finance team regularly updates and maintains RDN's systems and policies, ensuring the staff and organization is well supported. RDN has many initiatives and manages full-time, part-time, and temporary staff.

We are proud of our financial achievements this year and look forward to continued growth.

THE TEAM



**DEE ANN
BENARD**

Executive
Director



**LISA
BELANGER**

Director,
Operations



**SANDRA
DICESARE**

Finance
Manager



**JULIA
JUCO**

Communications
Manager



**KELLY
PETRASCHUK**

Office
Manager

\$3.6M

Provided by sponsors &
grantors

\$3.3M

Spent on projects and
initiatives

\$370K

Paid by members and
clients

21

staff positions

Fiscal Year End Date Change

During our amalgamation with the Agriculture and Food Council (AFC), a financial audit to AFC's year-end of March 31 was required, and we took the

opportunity to change RDN's year-end date. This aligns with the government's fiscal year-end which will simplify grant reporting requirements.

A BIG THANK YOU TO OUR MEMBERS

We could not do the work we do without the unequivocal support of the following post-secondary institutions that stand behind rural.



A BIG THANK YOU TO OUR

PARTNERS & FUNDERS

We could not do the work we do without the unequivocal support of the organizations and municipalities that stand behind **rural**.



RDN EXECUTIVE BOARD

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University of Lethbridge
Vice Chair (Director until
Nov/20)

ED PAJOR

University of Calgary
Vice Chair (Director until
Nov/20)

GILBERT PERRAS

Athabasca University
Vice Chair (Director until
Nov/20)

KEVIN SHUFFLEBOTHAM

Medicine Hat College
Chair (Board Vice Chair until
Nov/20)

NANCY BROADBENT

Portage College
Treasurer (Board Chair until
Nov/20)

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KIM WORTHINGTON
LESLIE WARREN
MARC BOYCHUK

MIKE LEATHWOOD
MITCHELL RHODES
NANCY GREEN

2020/2021 RDN STAFF

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Executive Director

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Program Manager, Rural Immigration

JULIA JUCO

Communications Manager

KELLY PETRASCHUK

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LINDA BERNICKI

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SCOTT TRAVIS

Director, Research & Programs

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SYDNEY STENEKES

Program Manager, Homelessness Initiatives

VANESSA PISANELLO

Program Assistant, Homelessness Initiatives

ZAIN ABEDIN

Director, Community Development

2020/2021 INTERNS

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Community Development
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Program Assistant,
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MAUDE OUELLET

Community Development
Coordinator



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